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ABSTRACT

If the major educational objective of classifying children into restricted range classroom environments is greater provision for individual differences--and given that there is no clear-cut evidence indicating that this object has been realized--then one is compelled to entertain the conclusion that ability grouping, as presently implemented, has failed to establish its merit as a sound instructional policy. Despite its increasing popularity, there is a notable lack of empirical evidence to support the use of ability grouping as an instrumental arrangement in public schools. Data from a close examination of studies ranging from those done in the Plainfield, New Jersey school system, the court findings in the Hobson vs. Hanson case in Washington, D.C., plus data drawn from numerous earlier studies by eminent social scientists further reveal ability grouping as a questionable practice. Taken as a whole the data indicate that grouping on the basis of standardized measures of achievement or aptitude tends to systematically separate children along ethnic and socio-economic composition of classes that are formed on the basis of the ability grouping rule of organization. (Author/JM)

ABILITY GROUPING
Good for Children or Not?

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NCRIEEO TIPSHEET #4

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* Consequences of Ability Grouping: Ethnic and Socio-Economic Separation of Children

"The debate between proponents of heterogeneous versus homogeneous grouping has been, in effect, over the issue of ability grouping. Both practices and studies of ability grouping in this country became common in the early 1920's, with the development of standardized group measures of intellectual performance. After a decline from the mid-1930's through the '40's, there had been a recurrence of interest in ability grouping that has tended to coincide with an increased public concern with academic achievement, particularly in mathematics and science (Goldberg, 1963)." In this probe by Dominick Esposito, the principle of ability grouping is re-examined within the context of equal educational opportunity. Says the investigator:

> It is not the purpose of this paper to engage in a detailed review of ability grouping research but to present a re-search of literature which demonstrates that in a relatively desegregated setting the practice of assigning children to classes organized according to the rule of homogeneous ability grouping not only tends to restrict the range and quality of instructional experiences that can be provided in the classroom, but also results in the systematic separation of children along ethnic and socio-economic dimensions.

This politely stated position, supported by evidence, and succinctly summarized in the author's conclusions, makes this document well worth reading by the educators in general, and may well encourage parents, teachers, and community leaders to re-evaluate the usefulness and meaningfulness of the practice.

The author is well aware of the pro and con attitudes of the homogeneous versus heterogeneous grouping forces. He presents the essence of the opposing positions as follows:

> The variety of reasons consistently offered with respect to the relative merits of ability grouping are by now well-known to most educators. The rationale for *homogeneous* ability grouping, not necessarily based on research findings (NEA, 1968), generally includes the following points: ability grouping takes individual differences into account by allowing pupils to advance at their own rate with others of similar ability, and by offering them methods and materials geared to their level; more individual attention from teachers is possible; pupils are challenged to do their best in their group, or to be promoted to the next level, within a realistic range of competi-

A Review Paper by Dominick Esposito, Instructor and Research Associate, Department of Guidance, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, New York, 1971. This document in its original form is available in the ERIC/IRCD Urban Disadvantaged Series (No. 20). Copies may be obtained by writing to ERIC/IRCD, Box 40, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, New York 10027.

tion; it is easier to teach to and provide materials for a narrower range; teachers in *heterogeneous* groups tend, because of these difficulties, to teach to the average or below-average.

On the other hand, the usual arguments for *heterogeneity* include these: homogeneous ability grouping is undemocratic and affects the self-concept of all children adversely by placing a stigma on those in lower groups while giving higher-group children an inflated sense of their own worth; adult life experiences are not ability grouped, and pupils must learn to work with a wide range of people; pupils of lesser ability may profit from learning with those of greater ability; it is impossible to achieve truly homogeneous grouping, even along a single variable, since test data are not generally reliable or valid enough for this type of distinction; and finally, homogeneous grouping may provide less sensitivity to individual differences in children by giving the teacher the false sense that pupils are similar in social needs, achievement and learning style, while heterogeneity permits different patterns of abilities to emerge within a group of children (NEA, 1968).

It seems clear from the above that proponents of the principle of homogeneous ability grouping emphasize the instructional advantage of the practice. Although experimental support for this belief has not previously been available for analysis, data recently collected by the investigator which has a direct bearing on this question is presented. After a careful examination of these data, Esposito points out that in the urban elementary school self-contained classroom, the patterns of instruction found in classes organized according to the principle *of homogeneous self-contained classrooms are very similar. The researchers' position is that regardless of the principle governing the pupil composition of the classroom, the essential pattern of teacher-student interaction manifested in the homogeneous classroom is comparable to that found in the heterogeneous classroom*. Given this, the assertion that homogeneous ability grouping provides a better opportunity for teachers to attend to individual differences among children is clearly not supported by the data.

To restate, if the major educational objective of classifying children into restricted range classroom environments is greater provision for individual differences--and given that there is not clear-cut evidence indicating that this objective has been realized, then one is compelled to entertain the conclusion that ability grouping, as presently implemented, has failed to establish its merit as a sound instructional policy. In this, the investigator seconds the conclusion put forth in the 1968 NEA report: "Despite its increasing popularity, there is a notable lack of empirical evidence to support the use of ability grouping as an instructional arrangement in public schools (p. 44).

Furthermore, if it can be demonstrated that homogeneous ability grouping results in ethnic and socio-economic separation of children, then the practice should be abandoned and replaced with educational models which do not conflict with the principle of equal educational opportunity."

Esposito has something provoking to say about socio-economic and ethnic status in relation to the test performance. Using data from a close examination of studies ranging from those done in the Plainfield, New Jersey school system, the court findings in the Hobson versus Hanson case in Washington, D.C., plus data drawn from numerous earlier studies by eminent social scientists, ability grouping is further revealed as a questionable practice. The general conclusions stand strongly and cry for reading, whatever position one takes.

Esposito's General Conclusions, Summary, and Remarks

In this study the principle and practices of ability grouping were analyzed to determine whether and to what extent the practice of homogeneous grouping resulted in ethnic and socio-economic *de facto* segregation in public school classrooms. It was noted at the outset that there existed a paucity of empirical studies addressed to this issue and that, given a continued effort to desegregate public schools, whatever data bearing on the relationship between ability grouping and *de facto* segregation in the classroom should be analyzed and interpreted in the interest of insuring an equal educational opportunity for all children.

Several hypotheses were presented to explain the relative absence of investigations of educational policies which tend to reinforce and perpetuate segregation in the schools. The first suggested a general lack of interest in the problem on the part of educational researchers. Notwithstanding this hypothesis, it was suggested that the absence was probably more a reflection of a fundamental dilemma in society, generally: the isolation of certain ethnic and socio-economic groups from the mainstream of a mixed society. That is, given a community, school district, or school that is overwhelmingly segregated, it was practically impossible to study the actual consequences of ability grouping in relation to ethnic and socio-economic separation in classrooms. Not that the question of segregation should not be of concern to educators and researchers, but it was not a researchable question in the typical self-contained, racially-isolated, educational setting.

Careful examination of the evidence presented suggested that ability grouping, as currently practiced, tends to reinforce and perpetuate the racial dilemma in the society at large. That is, given the evidence that large proportions of children of non-white and low socio-economic status consistently tended

to fall into the lower portions of standardized test score distributions, and given the fact that standardized test scores served as a principal criterion in assigning children to the various ability levels within a grade or school, it was demonstrated that in a relatively desegregated educational environment large proportions of children from ethnic minorities and low socio-economic status will be assigned to the lower ability groups and track curricula than will non-minority children and children of middle socio-economic class status. That this was in fact the case was clearly documented in the field studies conducted in the Plainfield, New Jersey and Washington, D.C. school systems.

Taken as a whole, the data presented indicate that grouping on the basis of standardized measures of achievement or aptitude tends to systematically separate children along ethnic and socio-economic dimensions. In fact, due to the relationship between ethnic and socio-economic status and student performance on standardized tests currently employed in assessing achievement and aptitude, the following general rule is put forth as a guide to help predict the ethnic and socio-economic composition of classes that are formed on the basis of the ability grouping rule of organization.

> In a relatively desegregated school environment, a decision to implement an ability grouping plan based on a standardized test, or its correlates, will tend to distribute children such that: (a) the greatest disparity in ethnic and socio-economic representation exists in the highest and lowest ability groups, while the greatest comparability exists in the middle ability groups, and (b) the relative proportions of black and white children assigned to the higher and lower ability groups will be directly related to the proportions represented at the extreme of the standardized test score distribution.

The mass of objective findings, by other independent researchers, and interpretations of data presented by Esposito are rewarding reading. They support very well the basic position taken by the researcher.

In addition, research and summaries of research studies in which the educational value of ability grouping was investigated, suggested that despite the fact that the practice was intended to provide for more comprehensive attention to individual differences in children, there existed a notable lack of evidence to support the practice of ability grouping as an instructional arrangement leading to individualization in the public schools. The evidence did *not* suggest that children who were assigned to the "fast" or "gifted" groups, and children assigned to the "slow" or "retarded" groups consistently out-performed children not assigned to classes on the basis of test performance ability. Contrariwise, the evidence suggested that the separation of children into distinctly different and isolated learning environments (schools and classrooms) systematically deprived all children of the variety of experiences and learning opportunities that were potentially available, and further tended to stigmatize children assigned to lower ability groups. In short, it was concluded that, by design, ability grouping placed an undesirable restriction on the quality of experience and opportunity for learning that was potentially available in the integrated educational environment.

Finally, the consequences of ability grouping (both heterogeneous and homogeneous) were further explored in terms of the patterns of instruction manifested in the course of the teaching-learning process. The data tended to support the following conclusions regarding the implementation of homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping in the self-contained classroom setting. Although a wide range of ability existed in classes organized according to the rule of homogeneous grouping, a slightly wider range of talent was seen to occur in the typical heterogeneous classroom. *However, regardless of the principle governing the composition of the classroom, no reliable differences existed in the patterns of instruction and achievement manifested in the course of the teaching-learning process, and neither organization resulted in the practice of an individualized approach to instruction.*

It is conceivable that men and women who hold the policy-making powers for school districts, schools and classrooms are totally unaware of the undesirable educational and social consequences of ability grouping. However, notwithstanding the evidence against ability grouping, several recent surveys clearly indicate that ability grouping on a national level is: (a) presently one of the predominant methods for organizing or classifying children into classroom units on both the elementary and secondary levels, (b) becoming more and more prevalent and is likely to be more widespread in the near future and (c) occurs more and more frequently as a child progresses each year through the elementary and secondary grades. The conclusion seems obvious. If one of the principal objectives of the American education system is to provide each child with an equal educational opportunity to maximize and develop his potential so that he may benefit himself, and thereby more effectively contribute to the larger society, then the present status and future trends with respect to ability grouping suggest that this cardinal objective will *not* be realized.

In a very real sense, the extent to which the current practice of ability grouping is permitted to exist in desegregated public schools represents the extent to which professional educators and governmental agencies sanction a self-fulfilling prophecy of school failure and sub-quality education in a setting that is charged with the responsibility of developing each child to his fullest. It would seem that such an expectation is reason enough to put a halt to the practice of ability grouping. That the practice also tends to relegate disproportionate numbers of disadvantaged youth to inferior

self-contained classrooms and to suppress alternative thinking and flexibility in the design of effective learning environments, should compel educators to eliminate the practice and turn attention to developing (and testing) educational models and materials which provide the psycho-structural foundation to support an approach to instruction which is more respectful of individual differences in development and learning.

Given emerging patterns of small group and individualized instruction, classrooms do not have to be organized to achieve homogeneity with respect to "ability" or achievement in a given subject area. Rather, forming groups of children who vary with respect to attitudes, learning styles, and ethnic and socio-economic status, achievement, and social maturity, encourages a flexibility in arranging instructional experiences that could serve as the foundation for innovative and, hopefully, more successful approaches to equalizing educational opportunity.

Wendell J. Roye

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The TWENTY FIFTH ANNUAL CONFERENCE of THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS WORKERS, in Seattle, Washington, 4th through 8th October, 1971, will be highlighted by many programs of primary interest to educators. Of particular interest will be a series of EQUAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY WORKSHOPS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS WORKERS IN EDUCATION, jointly sponsored by the *U.S. Office of Education, The Puerto Rican Forum,* and *Teachers College, Columbia University.* Among those scheduled to speak or lead training sessions are: *Suzanne Price,* Chief, Analysis, Resources, and Materials Staff of Division of Equal Educational Opportunity, Office of Education, Department of Health, Education and Welfare, *Dr. Edmund Gordon,* Chairman, Guidance Department, Teachers College, Columbia University, *Angel Ortiz,* Director, Institute for School and Community Interaction, Puerto Rican Forum, *Ron Edmonds,* State of Michigan Department of Education, *Juanita Griffin,* Atlantic City, N.J., *Luis Vieves,* Executive Director, Aspira Inc., *Donald Hadfield,* State of Minnesota Department of Education. Registration to EEO workshops will be limited. Fee $5.00 EEO workshop coordinator c/o NCRIEEO.

6